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Graham Gives Rent-Control Law Update at FBA's February Meeting

Councilmember Jim Graham (D-Ward One) gave an update on the progress of his rent-control bill to residents at last week's FBA meeting, and said that he hoped a measure would pass the council this year.

"This is the first legal reform of rent control in thirty years," Graham said at the FBA's monthly meeting, held Feb. 27 at the Melrose Hotel. "I wanted to reverse what had become an ingrained bias toward landlords."

Generally, he said, "my view is if what we do in the Council strengthens rent control, I'm in favor of it. If what we do weakens it, I'm against it."

He said the complexities of rent-control in D.C. include everything from rent "ceilings" – a dollar amount above current actual rents at which landlords can raise rents to, though not all apartments have such ceilings – to considerations of "means testing" to determine affordable units in rent-controlled buildings.

His Rent Control Reform Act would cap annual increases at one per year and at 10%. The 10% increase – higher than the generally allowed cost-of-living increases that are more typically around 3% – would be allowed only if there is room between the current rent and the rent ceiling, which in for some apartments is higher than the actual rent.

Rent-Control Advocate: *Councilmember Jim Graham (D-Ward One) addresses the FBA at its Feb. 27 meeting. Photos: FBN*

Sharing a Smile: *Graham shares a smile with FBA Vice President Barbara Spillinger (left) and immediate past FBA president Ron Cocome.*

Striking a Balance

Graham did say that he favored striking a balance in any updating of the law, so that regulations would not force landlords to simply divest from their ownership. The city needs to have affordable rental units, he told the FBA, adding that in his area, Ward One, there are about 60% renters, many in pre-1975 buildings.

Rent control applies only to buildings built before 1975.

Graham called a provision within the current rent-control law called "vacancy high comparable" the "real villain" of the law. That's a provision under which landlords can raise rates to the highest comparable unit when someone vacates an apartment.

All over the city, he said, that has led to much higher levels of unaffordable apartments. A study he cited showed that at Columbia Plaza in Foggy Bottom, the unaffordable percentage had risen from 38% to 69%.

"This is the gentrifier and what has turned affordable units into luxury apartments overnight," Graham said.

Several residents said that, especially for the retired or elderly living on government pensions, rent increases of 8% to 10% are too high. Resident Bob Hershey of the Hamilton House on New Hampshire Ave. said the effects of rent control are effectively "eliminating the middle class" by leaving only rich and poor residents in the city.

Graham also said that he wanted to put the word "consumer" back in the city's Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, which oversees landlord-tenant regulations, among other things.

He said that department had seen its share of tribulation in the past few years, but that he thought its performance was improving lately.

"DCRA telling tenants who call them for help to 'Go get a lawyer' absolutely must stop," he said.

– *FBN*

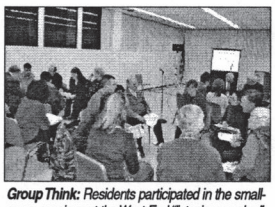
'Listening Session' at West End Library Draws a Crowd

Residents Say They Are Leery of 'Public-Private Partnerships'

Two weeks after it hosted a board meeting of the D.C. library board, the West End library hosted a "listening session" Feb. 22 on the future of the branch and the library system citywide.

Many residents who attended gave the members of Mayor Williams' "blue-ribbon panel" on restructuring the system an earful on the future of the library system, and some questioned the entire process of the sessions, in which residents were placed into small circular groups and asked to address specific questions put forth by a facilitator.

Several of the groups "broke out" of the mold of the questions they were asked to address, instead talking with library officials about their concern about the process, the possibility of selling off libraries as part of "public-private partnerships" the blue-ribbon panel is considering and general concerns about the library system as a whole.



Group Think: *Residents participated in the small-group sessions at the West End "listening session," though some deviated from their given scripts.*

"My focus is the [West End] branch," Robert Haas, president of the West End Library Friends, a citizens group that supports the library, told John Hill, chairman of the D.C. library board, in one small group discussion. "We want an attractive, secure, well-maintained branch here."

Newly installed Advisory Neighborhood 2A Commissioner Michael Thomas, who represents the West End, was in the same breakout group. He cautioned that with the recent zoning battles surrounding the library on Square 37 – where it sits along with a Special Operations police station, two small townhouses and the Tiverton apartment building – the neighborhood would be wary of more attempted changes.

"I think this branch could and should be a core for all kinds of community activity," Thomas said. But, he added, "How this branch gets [redeveloped]... could make anything that happens to it a long, agonizing and potentially bitter experience.

Community Center

Square 37 was the subject of an attempted rezoning to commercial from residential zoning less than two years ago; the Zoning Commission voted 4-0 in July 2004 not to upzone it.

Many residents said they wanted the library to be a center for many kinds of community activities, from music and theater groups to more arts and educational space and programs.

But many of the residents were more concerned about the process of the meetings, as articulated by Washington Post columnist Marc Fisher's piece which ran the next day, Feb. 23. In it, Fisher criticized the blue-ribbon panel's process of dividing people into small groups and more generally over the way for elected and appointed officials hiring consultants and facilitators to deal with community groups.

While Fisher was writing about the library process in particular, he noted that governments around the entire region have hired such facilitators as intermediaries, blocking direct contact with constituents and their concerns. In the library's case, he wrote, it served a purpose of dividing potential dissenters from the panel's scripted questions.

But the residents who attended the meeting did not hesitate to go off script. Local resident Deborah Akel, who has lived in the Tiverton for 13 years, said there had been other "empty promises" from local developers, promising everything from retail to grocery stores, which did not materialize.

Listening Session: *West End ANC Commissioner Michael Thomas (left), D.C. Library Board Chairman John Hill (right) and resident Dusty Horwitt (center) at the West End library "listening session."*

"I hear this term 'public-private partnership' and I just cringe," Akel said. "I think libraries are sacred... [and] would like the city to hold developers accountable" for their promises, she said.

Residents: City Needs to Keep its Promises

Dupont resident Debby Hanrahan, who said she uses the library regularly, said "This is one case where the city needs to be very careful about keeping its promises. Please do not pull a bait-and-switch on us. Please do not amputate our arms to get a better leg," she said following the group discussions.

Fran Buckley, director of the city's library system, also attended the meeting, admitted he took an earful from activists in his group who said they wanted to make sure the libraries were not sold off piecemeal, or, if some such as the central Martin Luther King library were sold, that it would be for adequate, market-rate dollars. (The city is contemplating selling MLK and relocating the central library at the old convention site downtown.)

"I think [the process] is going well because of the community involvement," Buckley said following the meeting. "There is a great deal of interest in improving the whole system by the mayor, the (city) council and the community. I do see hope for improvement."

Community Input: *D.C. Public Library Director Fran Buckley (right) said following the "listening session" that community input was helping the panel.*

Library Board Chairman Hill said the library system needs about $450 million for its planned improvements.

"We have not included an amount for any public-private partnerships," he said.

– *FBN*

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The Foggy Bottom News is published by the Foggy Bottom Association as a service to its members and provides information on FBA and neighborhood news, programs, activities and other events of interest to FBA members. Contributions and story ideas are welcome, but the FBN reserves the right to edit or hold pieces as space requires.

The Foggy Bottom Association was formed by a group of citizens in 1955 and was formally incorporated in 1959. Attendance at FBA meetings is open to all residents of Foggy Bottom and the West End.

FBA Officers:
PRESIDENT – Joy Howell • VICE PRESIDENT – Barbara Spillinger
SECRETARY – Jill Nevius • TREASURER – Russell Conlan
MEMBERSHIP – Edward B. Gable Jr.

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Ellie Becker, Joseph G. Chaplick, Elizabeth B. Elliott, Jacqueline G. Lemire, Michael G. Malloy, James R. O'Leary, Ronald Cocome (Immediate Past President; *Ex Officio*)

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➡ ➡ ➡ *FOGGY BOTTOM NEWS (continued from preceding page) March 8, 2006*

Use that FBA Membership Card!

Foggy Bottom Association members receive a variety of discounts from local area merchants simply by showing our membership card! Here's a list – and stay tuned for our "Preferred Merchants Program," coming in 2006! The membership card also allows FBA members use of GWU's Gelman Library.

FBA MEMBER DISCOUNTS

Chateau Florist
2000 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
Tel: 293-9005
10% off any arrangement of at least $25

Danny Diaz, Ltd. (Men's Clothing)
522 23rd St., NW
Tel: 296-2767
20% off merchandise; 10% off men's and women's alterations

Elenco Salon
504 23rd St., NW
Tel: 293-3006
$5 discount on any hair service

Expressions (Fine Clothing)
2000 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
Tel: 775-9299
15% discount

Grillfish Restaurant
1200 New Hampshire Ave., NW
Tel: 331-7310 • Fax: 331-3751
10% off food purchases
(does not apply to alcohol)

Marshall's Bar & Grille
2524 L St., NW
Tel: 333-1155 • Fax: 333-4664
10% off; does not apply to any other discounts

Metropolitan Optical
2000 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
Tel: 659-6555 • Fax: 659-2134
15% off any eyewear purchase; not applicable with other offers or on contact lenses

New Hampshire Valet
600 New Hampshire Ave., NW
Tel: 342-5700
10% off dry cleaning, laundry, shoe repair

One Fish Two Fish
2423 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
Tel: 822-0977
10% off total meal bill for dine-in and carry-out only; not available on delivery orders

Primi Piatti
2013 Eye St., NW
Tel: 223-3600 • Fax: 296-3725
10% off check

ProEuro Hair Design
2100 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
Tel: 887-9191
10% off haircut and style; 20% off color highlights or perm

600 Restaurant at the Watergate
600 New Hampshire Ave., NW
Tel: 337-5890 • Fax: 337-5895
10% discount after 8:00 p.m.
(does not apply to bar service or alcohol)

Shohreh Day Spa
1712 Eye St., NW, Ste. 914
Tel: 452-9300
20% off services on first visit; 10% on subsequent visits.

Sizzling Express Columbia Plaza
538 23rd St., NW
Tel: 659-1234 • Fax: 659-2800
10% off hot foods, salads, sandwiches and fountain sodas
(does not apply to sushi)

Thai Coast Restaurant
2514 L St., NW
Tel: 333-2460 • Fax: 333-2462
10% discount on food in restaurant (does not apply to alcohol)

Watch & Band Clinic
2000 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
Tel: 785-4552 • Fax: 785-4552
15% off leather watch bands

Watergate Gallery & Frame Design
2552 Virginia Ave., NW
(Watergate Mall)
Tel: 338-4488 • Fax: 338-4451
10% off custom framing

Watergate Photo & Copy
2560 Virginia Ave., NW
Tel: 333-7700 • Fax: 333-3083
10% discount

Watergate Valet
2546 Virginia Ave., NW
(Watergate Mall)
Tel: 337-7570
10% discount on dry cleaning and laundry

Watergate Wine and Beverage
2544 Virginia Ave., NW
(Watergate Mall)
Tel: 333-0636 • Fax: 965-2416
Wine: 10% off per case • Liquor or Water: 5% off per case

Williams The Tailor
825 21st St., NW
Tel: 822-8000
10% off general alteration and repair

The Wine Specialist
2115 M St., NW
Tel: 833-0707 • Fax: 833-9507
10% off on all non-sale items (includes single bottle / cases of wine, liquor, beer, water, soda, etc.); not valid with other sales and promotions

SAVE THE DATES!

2006 FBA General Membership Meetings:

March 27
April 24
May 22

June 26 – Annual meeting
Speakers TBA

All meetings at Melrose Hotel, 2430 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, at 7:30 pm.